



TELL ME SOMETHING GOOD

a novel

COURT STEVENS

Praise for Court Stevens

"Last Girl Breathing is a breakneck thriller set along the slow, snaking rivers of the South, a sweet-talking, hard-hitting, heart-wrenching whodunnit that keeps a reader guessing until its very last breath."

—Sharon Cameron, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Bluebird and *The Light in Hidden Places*

"Stevens' sentence-level writing sizzles, effectively conveying both Nyla's heart and the Kentucky setting."

—*Kirkus* for *We Were Kings*

"Easily consumable with a fast-paced plot, this is a quick and enticing read for fans of murder mysteries and family dramas. Stevens delivers a cunning tale that will appeal to existing fans and could attract some new readers. A solid addition to any YA collection."

—*School Library Journal* for *We Were Kings*

"Stevens deftly weaves multiple threads, including diamonds, meth, national politics, and human trafficking, into a riveting narrative of betrayed friendships and fraught family ties. Pairing old-fashioned amateur sleuthing with a decidedly on-trend, online true crime investigation, this taut mystery unspools with a chillingly calibrated pace, and the violent, stunning payoff is sure to surprise even the most genre-familiar reader . . . Readers looking for their next addictive page-turner can mine this well-crafted whodunit for every worthy twist."

—*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* for *We Were Kings*

"*We Were Kings* is the best kind of mystery novel—intelligent and bursting with heart. As Nyla untangled her family's secrets, the twists left me breathless."

—Brittany Cavallaro, *New York Times* bestselling author

"Bingeable. Atmospheric. A book that grabs hold and doesn't let go. As a lifelong fan of suspense novels, I found *We Were Kings* brilliantly fresh while also saturated with a classic feel. A Nancy Drew for modern audiences."

—Caroline George, author of *The Summer We Forgot*

"The final reveal is surprising and chilling."

—Kirkus for *The June Boys*

"Stevens takes a good swing at resolving lost faith and trust while trying to rebuild the strengths and bonds of family and friends."

—*Publishers Weekly* for *The June Boys*

"Tense and haunting, *The June Boys* is not only a terrifying story of the missing, but a heartbreaking, hopeful journey through the darkness. Beautifully written and sharply plotted, this is a story that lingers long after you turn the final page."

—Megan Miranda, *New York Times* bestselling author of *All the Missing Girls* and *The Last House Guest*

"Masterfully plotted with stunning twists and turns. Hang on tight, *The June Boys* is a fantastically crafted suspense that keeps you guessing until the last page!"

—Ruta Sepetys, international bestselling author

"*The June Boys* by Court Stevens is a gripping suspense that hooked me from the first sentence. Fabulous characterization and a layered plot with tension that escalated with every page. Highly recommended!"

—Colleen Coble, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *One Little Lie* and the Lavender Tides series

"I just finished *The June Boys*, and I loved it. The feeling of the intensity of friendship at that age, the tension of the chase to find Welder, all the twists to get to who it was—I was hooked and couldn't stop reading. I wanted to cry with Aulus every time I read his letters and felt that Thea was that friend everyone needs. Though flawed, she is devoted to her friends with a ferocity that I loved."

—Catherine Bock, book buyer for Parnassus Books



ALSO BY COURT STEVENS

Last Girl Breathing

We Were Kings

The June Boys

Four Three Two One

Dress Codes for Small Towns

The Lies About Truth

The Blue-Haired Boy

Faking Normal

Tell Me Something Good

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HARPER MUSE

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A Note from the Author

I WAS A FRESHMAN IN college when a shooting at Heath High School forever changed the way I thought about gun violence in public spaces. *Tell Me Something Good* is not an active shooter narrative but it does begin with a threat of public violence. The story camera stays on the character attempting to stop a weapons auction that will arm the potential shooter. Public violence of any type should be sensitive and heartbreaking to all, but for those of you for whom this hits too close to home, please protect your mental health.

Prologue

HERE IS A NAME FROM a potential future: Corey William Turrent.

In one arrangement of time, Corey will take an assault rifle from his father's gun case. He will hide the weapon under his jacket. He will walk the three sweltering blocks from his home in Buckman, New Jersey, to Roseville Elementary. Once he's through the lobby doors, he will open fire.

If this future comes to fruition, Corey William Turrent will kill seventeen students and four teachers.

The thing that hangs between this atrocity and a safe and lovely day for Roseville Elementary is what occurs at the Lodges Royale in Bent Tree, Kentucky, many years before.

Here is also where I introduce you to Anna Ryder, and we find out which future is ours.

CHAPTER 1

ANNA RYDER'S NEED FOR A new job starts in a doctor's office.

Cancer sucks. Everyone knows that. And because the body tells on itself, Anna and her mother, Starr, feel the diagnosis coming before it comes in earnest. In the week before the appointment, they downplay the threat. They won't borrow trouble until the doctor uses the C word. The weight loss might be something simple: a vitamin deficiency, a thyroid problem. Whatever it is, it's fixable.

That is the lie you tell yourself when you love someone.

When they are alone, their fears run them into the ground. Each imagines what will happen if the worst comes for Starr and neither of them can breathe. The mother because the cancer is in her lungs. The daughter because there is no one she loves more.

* * *

The women know they will continue to laugh, no matter the diagnosis, because Starr's doctor looks like he walked off a Hallmark movie set. Pretty instead of handsome. Fit. Salt-and-pepper hair. Five o'clock shadow.

No wedding ring. That's the first problem.

The second is his metaphors. When he delivers the diagnosis, he makes the mistake of describing cancer as a boxing opponent. His pep talk ends with, "Together with the treatments, we'll give cancer the old one-two. Right, Starr?"

Starr lowers the register of her voice and answers, "Right, Coach." Then she slips off the exam table, punches the air, and dances around chanting popular lines from *Rocky*.

Anna has never seen more than a meme of *Rocky*, but she knows every word to "Eye of the Tiger," which she begins to sing. Off-key. The women crescendo on the chorus. And despite them poking fun, the doctor leans against the exam room door, clutches his iPad to his chest, and laughs right along with them.

"What do you think, Doc?" Anna asks, gesturing to her still-dancing, still-gorgeous mother.

His answer: "Keep that sense of humor. It'll carry you through this thing."

Starr wheels toward him, winks, and says, "If laughter doesn't, flirting will."

"*Hallmark*," Anna mouths as the doctor returns the wink.

Starr raises her eyebrows, pleased with his response. "If that's your bedside manner, break a HIPAA rule and call me later." She makes a phone with her thumb and pinky finger and wags it beside her ear.

Anna groans on cue, accepting her part in the shtick. At least this guy is a doctor. No belt buckle the size of his face. No mullet. And presumably, he doesn't owe a man named the Copter forty thousand dollars. That puts him several important steps above Starr's last romantic hoorah.

"You two ladies are a hoot," he says before he leaves.

He will go home that evening and ask his girlfriend to marry him. Something about Starr reminds him of what's important. She has that effect on people.

The minute the door closes, Starr collapses against the exam table, out of breath, out of energy . . . out of everything. Anna drops a kiss on her mother's head and helps her onto the table. "That was kind of you."

"Well," Starr says, her breath still airy from exertion. "Imagine handing out death sentences"—the cough starts deep in her throat—"Every day. Sounds worse than cancer, dontcha think?" She is bent double by the end of the sentence.

Anna strokes her mother's back until her body quiets and then unties the gown. Redressing exhausts Starr, even with Anna's help. Anna is careful around the bruises, always gentle, and when she finishes, her mother's sweatshirt looks like it's still on a hanger. The treatment will take more of her. There isn't much left.

The nurse returns and explains Starr's treatment options. At the end of the speech, she tacks on, "Hopefully the procedures and meds will be offset by your insurance. Nearly free, if you ask me." She pats Starr's shoulder like it's all a done deal.

Starr and Anna paste kindness across their faces rather than burst this nurse's bubble. After all, she's doing her job, and "offset by your insurance" and "nearly free" is likely the whole kit and caboodle for most people.

People who aren't from Luxor.

Anna and Starr have the misfortune of being from a town so poor that even the mayor doesn't flush his toilet after every use. There aren't a different set of rules for people who grew up in Luxor, Illinois; there are different games.

Years later, when that same nurse falls in love with a man from Luxor, she'll remember Starr and Anna and how helpless they seemed. She'll regret her choice of words. Her obliviousness. Her privilege. And she'll understand that the *nearly free* she offered Starr was similar to "free" circus tickets for those who visit traveling big tops that take over mall parking lots. Nearly free is actually very expensive.

So, as the nurse rattles off upcoming appointment dates and treatment schedules, Anna maths Starr's survival.

126 miles round trip
divided by an old, unreliable truck
times \$4 a gallon
times a minimum of 25 appointments
plus "nearly free" co-payments that start after a \$10,000 de-
ductible
plus vitamins not covered by insurance
equals
bad news

CHAPTER 2

IN THE TRUCK, MOTHER AND daughter tap the radio volume at the same time and grin happily at their usual kismet. They do not discuss the diagnosis or the expenses ahead. They stare out the window as they pass the last of the city buildings. The music thrums and eggs them on. Their route home is a two-lane state highway with steep shoulders. You have to drive it like you mean it.

Starr reminds Anna exactly where the police cruisers often lay in wait, as she always does. And Anna says, “Yes, Mother, I’ve driven before,” which pulls a huff from Starr. They agree on many things. Anna’s style behind the wheel isn’t among them. Anna needs the power of controlling the vehicle. Difficult emotions are better digested above sixty miles an hour on a curvy country road. Starr needs her darling daughter to slow the eff down so she can die of cancer rather than by putting the truck through a tree.

Fall colors their world orange and yellow and red. The leaves whoosh across the blacktop in tiny whirlwinds. The view offers a distraction from their thoughts. Fields and churches. Ponds added to front yards. Grain bins. A landscape so beautiful and simple it begs you to lower the window and take a huge drink of country air.

Starr says dreamily, “Baby, I can’t imagine a world without fall or dogs.”

“Why would you even try?”

“You should rescue another dog,” Starr says

“I’ll think about it.” Anna is actually thinking, *Dog food is expensive.*

Simon and Garfunkel sing them all the way back to Bent Tree and then across the long rainbow-shaped cage bridge to Luxor. They need a good rain. The shore of the Ohio is longer than it should be. From high on the bridge, Anna can’t see the fish carcasses on the rocks, but they’re there.

Without any hint of a turn signal, Anna whips into the Luxor High School parking lot and drives behind the school to the football field. Starr starts to protest and stops herself. If she had said what was on her heart, it would have been, “Darling, I have to pee.” At which point, Anna might have turned the truck toward their farmhouse, because holding your bladder was a brutal thing. She stays silent instead. Anna doesn’t do anything accidentally. If they’re here, she has a reason.

At the small, dilapidated stadium, Anna wraps her arm around her mother’s waist and leads her along the concrete walkway cracked by time and weeds, past the unmanned ticket booth, and up the bleachers. Neither woman likes football. They attended games when Anna was in high school out of boredom and then out of obligation when Anna went to work for the school system.

Anna is fairly sure her mother has to pee, but her gut says to sit on the bleachers at the football field, and she is a gut-follower. So there they sit, with clasped hands, humming “Scarborough Fair” under their breath, waiting on something unknown to happen.

The sun hovers near the horizon line, in that annoying place that

turns your vision into tiny blinking balls of yellow light. The women squint at the practice below, their ears full of whistles, helmet slaps, and crunching collisions. Is there anything as vulgar as freshmen boys cussing at each other?

Through all the noise, Anna thinks about her mother. That silly, wonderful *Rocky* dance. How in many ways it is the very essence of Starr.

For Anna, Starr is . . .

Better than a hero in a postapocalyptic movie.

A giantess of love.

A one-stop parenthood shop.

And her very best friend.

(Despite her need to offer driving advice. No one is perfect, after all.)

Meanwhile, Starr thinks first about the way her doctor looked in his khaki pants and questions if she might live long enough to slip them off his hips. Probably not. But she will live plenty long enough to fantasize.

Then they both think about cancer for far too long.

“Mom,” Anna says after the boys jog to the locker room.

“When I’m gone, do not sell the farm.” Starr’s voice is harsh and scared for the first time that day.

Anna squeezes her mother’s hand in that slightly annoyed, slightly reassuring way that daughters do when they’ve been warned many times about something they have zero intention of doing. *Don’t drink and drive. Don’t get teenage pregnant. Don’t marry a Northerner.* The *Do not sell the farm* lecture is old and worn. But for the first time in their relation-

ship, it's a viable option. Anna has been trying to think of a way to bring up the topic. "Mom, we'll do what we have to do—"

"No."

Anna scoffs at the stubbornness. "You're being ridiculous."

"Promise me," Starr says. Anna understands the plea. Starr is an intensely private woman. They aren't one of those "Welcome, y'all" families. The metal gate stretched across the end of their driveway has five Private Property signs.

"I won't," Anna says, but then she does promise, because if she only has eight months left with her mother—and that was what the doctor said, eight months if she forgoes treatments—she isn't going to spend them fighting.

Starr pats her daughter's knee and then squeezes it gently. "After I'm gone, the rule's the same: the house and barns are private."

"You're not going anywhere. Except to treatments," Anna says.

That draws a smile from Starr and a polite change of subject. "Baby girl, why are we here?"

The sun is down by then and twilight grays the field. Anna points to the perimeter fence where hundreds of Styrofoam cups press through the chain link. They spell out the words *Relay for Life* in large four-foot letters, although most of the *F* is gone.

"Next year we're going to walk in the Relay for Life. You and me. We're going to do more than give cancer the old one-two. We're going to kick cancer in the balls with a metal-toed boot. You understand?"

Starr lays her head in Anna's lap. The gesture isn't a yes or a no; it's a thank-you for a love that looks into the future and grasps for hope.

The two women stay clutching each other until Starr lifts her face off Anna's tear-soaked thighs and says, "My silly goose, it's time for hot dogs and *NCIS*!"

“Okay, my crazy duck,” Anna replies.

At which point they hurry home and Starr finally gets to pee.

Though she doesn’t flush. No need to waste water when there is so much money they need to save.

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CHAPTER 3

ANNA IS FOREVER THE SILLY goose and her mother the crazy duck.

She loves other people, but no one the way she loves Starr. Especially after she ended things with Jack. Jack is the ex-fiancé, ex love of her life, ex non-asshole of assholes, which is quite a complicated thing to be. How can a man be the best and the worst at the same time? And what does it say about her that she never let him explain?

Regardless, Anna is over thirty and hasn't gone on a date in over three years. And yes, she sleeps in her childhood bedroom; and yes, there have been job offers and partners from other towns, but none are magnetic enough to pull her heart away from Jack or her life away from Starr.

Now Starr's the one being pulled away.

Without the treatments, there is little to no hope. Selling the farm makes sense. That will be more than enough money to put them in a small Luxor apartment and cover gas and needs. Anna understands the sentiment of loving land like a person, but not the actuality. Their property is breathtaking, but at the end of the day it's merely dirt and seeds.

“Dirt and seeds are hope and love,” her mother always says.

But what good is hope and love without her mother?

To be fair, the farm is a Ryder legacy. In 1943, Luxor, Illinois, was a booming river and train town. Starr’s grandfather built the family home on fifteen-foot steel risers. Wise man. His home, like the Lodges in Kentucky, avoid all the seasonal flooding that comes with living in a river town flood zone. The baby-blue clapboard farmhouse rises from the middle of their fifty acres like a squatty watchtower, and the Ohio River runs a quarter mile behind the acreage. When the wind blows, they are close enough to smell the cigarette smoke of the men working the barges.

In a non-flood year, the fields surrounding the house yield one of the best crops in the county. Starr lives on the crop money, so over time, even their small yard became part of the field. Two ruts lead from the old iron gate to a parking place under the house. They carry on all the way back to the barn, buildings, and creek. Everything else is cornstalks, beans, or wheat.

If you live on a river and farm, you spend more time praying about rain than you do breathing. You need it to come. You need it to stop. The spring before Anna was set to leave for college, Luxor had what the meteorologist called a five-hundred-year flood.

Everything within six miles that wasn’t on risers was damaged. Many of the homes. All the crops. Anna and Starr were trapped in their house for four days. By the time the bottom steps of the deck dried and Anna put her foot back on the muddy earth, she knew she wasn’t leaving Luxor or Starr. She turned down every scholarship and got one of the only jobs in town.

Her paycheck kept them from losing the farm.

When Starr has a glass or two of wine, she says Anna kept them

from losing far more, but she never explained what.

Starr is a woman with secrets.

And while Anna sometimes considers it a betrayal, and sometimes fights about the secrets with Starr (and never wins), and sometimes grows restless with sacrificing so much for a cause she can't name or understand, she does it anyway. And somehow finds a way to do it with love.

* * *

Starr has a reason they cannot sell that has nothing to do with “the Ryder legacy” she spouts off about when asked. Many years before, something hideous was hidden in the barn at the end of ruts. Starr knows she will have to tell Anna about it soon, but she's not ready.

The trouble with the truth is this: we can't always control when it comes.

About the Author



Photo by Carla Lafontaine

COURT STEVENS grew up among rivers, cornfields, churches, and gossip in the small-town South. She is a former adjunct professor, youth minister, and Olympic torchbearer. These days she writes coming-of-truth fiction and is the Director of Warren County Public Library in Kentucky. She has a pet whale named Herman, a band saw named Rex, and several novels with her name on the spine: *Faking Normal*, *The Lies About Truth*, the e-novella *The Blue-Haired Boy*, *Dress Codes for Small Towns*, *Four Three Two One*, *The June Boys*, *We Were Kings*, and *Last Girl Breathing*.

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